

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Case File No.: AA-76601

AK-040-EA00-013

Type of Action: Special Recreation Permits (commercial heli-skiing tours)

Location:

Chilkat Glacier :	T. 25 S, R. 58 E., Sec. 33
Ferebee Glacier	T. 27 S., R. 58 E., Secs. 6, 7, 20, 29
West Creek Glacier	T. 26 S., R. 58 E, Sec. 34
Norse Glacier:	T. 25 S., R. 57 E., Secs. 26-27
Grand Canyon Glacier	T. 26 S., R. 58 E., Sec. 12

All land descriptions are within the Copper River Meridian

Applicant(s): Temsco Helicopters Inc.
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Preparing Office: Bureau of Land Management
Anchorage Field Office
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Date: April 10, 2000



I. INTRODUCTION

A. Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action:

The purpose and need for the Proposed Action is to meet anticipated public demand for quality guided services which provides safe helicopter access to remote or relatively inaccessible locations near Skagway, Alaska. Temsco Helicopters has been meeting this demand since 1986 and is the only company currently offering glacier landing tours in the Skagway area of Alaska. This proposed service will meet anticipated public demand for quality guided glacier landing tours in the Skagway area. Temsco Helicopters also offers the same services under commercial permit with the U.S. Forest Service (F.S.) on the Tongass National Forest.

B. Conformance With Land Use Plan:

No land use plan exists for this area. However, this environmental analysis assesses the impacts of the Proposed Action and provides a basis for a decision on the proposal (43 CFR 1610.8(b)(1)).

C. Relationship to Statutes, Regulations, or Other Plans:

The applicant must obtain a State of Alaska Business license and the appropriate licenses and certificates from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

The BLM does not have jurisdiction to regulate aircraft flight paths, altitudes, or noise caused by aircraft overflights or flightseeing operations. BLM may regulate landing locations and on-the-ground commercial activities. Enroute operations may be indirectly influenced by requiring certain standards to be met as a condition of receiving a permit.

Permit holders are required to abide by all federal, state, county (borough), or municipal laws, ordinances, or regulations which are applicable to the areas or the operations covered in the permit. Failure to do so could result in either suspension or revocation of the permit.

The airport in Skagway is un-towered and is under jurisdiction of the FAA. The Flight Standards Division of the FAA is responsible for all flight operations (including safety) in controlled and uncontrolled airspace.

The Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) for the FAA and the Department of Transportation Volume 14, Chapter 1, part 135.203 states:

“Except when necessary for take-off and landing, no person may operate under visual flight rules (VFR) a Helicopter below 300 feet above the surface or less than 300 feet horizontally from any obstacle”

Refer to EA-AK-040-95-015, Environmental Assessment for Helicopter Landing Tours in the Skagway and Haines Area, Pages 1-10 through 1-12 (available at the BLM Anchorage Field Office), for further information on other required laws and permits pertaining to jurisdiction and regulation of helicopter flight paths, altitudes, or noise caused by helicopters.

A BLM Special Recreation Permit (SRP) regulates commercial services on BLM public land and related water pursuant to 43 CFR 8372 and Handbook H-8372-1. As the land is selected by the State of Alaska, a concurrence in accordance with Section 906(k) of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) is required.

The Coastal Zone Management Act requires the BLM, when consulting or authorizing activities or undertaking development directly affecting the coastal zone, to insure that the activities or development be consistent with the approved Alaska Coastal Management Program to the maximum extent practical. The activities under the Proposed Action are consistent with the Alaska Coastal Management Program.

II. PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

A. Proposed Action:

Temsco Helicopters Inc. has proposed to continue conducting glacier landing tours on public land with helicopters (American Eurocopter, A-Star 350B-2). All flights would originate and terminate in Skagway, Alaska.

Glacier landings would occur on the Norse, West Creek, Ferebee, Grand Canyon, and Chilkat Glaciers. With exception for the Norse Glacier, operation hours would be between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 7:30 p.m. After September 1st, authorized operating hours on the Norse Glacier would be between 8:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. only.

The operation season is from May 15 to September 20. They estimate approximately 18,000 user days during this time period. Since 1995, Temsco Helicopters has been permitted to conduct glacier landing tours on the above listed glaciers. Partial mitigation under their permit includes authorization of a specific number of landings on each particular glacier. The maximum number of landings was reached during the 1999 operating season. Temsco Helicopters is

requesting authorization to continue operation for the next five years at the 1999 levels. These are as follows:

<u>Glacier</u>	<u>Number of Landings</u>
Norse	400
West Creek	2,800
Ferebee	1,100
Grand Canyon	200
Chilkat	200

Flight routes to landing sites from Skagway are well established and adhere to local traffic patterns (see maps in EA-AK-040-95-015 and flight route descriptions on Page 1-5 C.2.a). Upon departing Skagway, altitude gains are primarily over Taiya Inlet and mild terrain. Altitude gains to landing site elevations are made prior to flying up drainages or canyons.

Generally, three helicopters take off at the same time and fly to the glacier. The actual glacier tour involves unloading clients (usually while the helicopter is running), and escorting them to a safety zone while the helicopters depart. A guided 20-30 minute talk/walk about glaciers is conducted and concludes back in the safety zone while the helicopters arrive with new clients and the waiting clients return to Skagway.

An EA on Helicopter Glacier Landing Tours (EA-AK-040-95-015) was completed on May 10, 1995 which analyzes impacts of helicopter use in the same area. The mitigation measures adopted in the Decision Record will again be incorporated into the Proposed Action (Attachment 1).

B. No Action Alternative:

The No Action Alternative would be to not authorize commercial helicopter operations and tours on BLM-administered lands.

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

All of the land described in the Proposed Action has been selected by the State of Alaska as part of its entitlement at statehood. BLM is responsible for management of the land until it is conveyed to the State or the selection is relinquished.

See EA-AK-040-95-015 (p.3-16 thru 18, E.4.a. thru e.) for descriptions of specific glaciers and their affected environment.

A. Critical Elements:

It has been determined that the following Critical Elements of the human environment are either not present or would not be affected by the Proposed Action or the No Action Alternative:

Air Quality
Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs)
Cultural/Paleontological Resources
Environmental Justice
Farm Lands (prime or unique)
Floodplains
Invasive, non-native plant species
Native American Religious Concerns
Subsistence
T&E Species
Wastes (Hazardous/Solid)
Water Quality (Surface/Ground)
Wetlands/Riparian
Wild and Scenic Rivers
Wilderness

1. ANILCA Section 810 (a), Evaluation and Finding:

These lands are selected by the State of Alaska and therefore do not fall under the definition of Federal Public Lands under ANILCA 102 (3) or under the authority of the Federal Subsistence Board or Subsistence Management Regulations for the harvest of Fish and Wildlife on Federal Public Lands in Alaska. Should these lands be relinquished this would fall under the authorities of ANILCA Section 810 (a).

B. Wildlife:

For specific discussion on the affected environment for wildlife see EA-AK-040-95-015, (p.3-16-18, E.4 a-e). This discusses the wildlife habitat within the areas of operation.

C. Recreational Areas:

During the scoping meetings for EA-AK-040-95-015, specific areas were identified by the public where the impact of aircraft noise could adversely affect recreationists. The Proposed Action does not include any of these areas. There are no known hiking trails to the snow fields and glaciers listed for the Proposed Action.

D. Socio-Economics

The town of Skagway, Alaska has a seasonal, but strong tourism based economy. Retail shops, restaurants, hotels, transportation and tours generate substantial income for the business community and sales tax revenues for the city. Active tourism businesses support other sectors of the community through spin-off purchases.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Impacts of the Proposed Action:

1. Wildlife

Wildlife will experience two types of aircraft encounters. The first is enroute flight activity where helicopters are passing by wildlife and their habitats. The second are the areas for landing and taking off areas associated with the on-the-ground activities. These are the areas of greatest concern.

Enroute flight routes could pass by mountain goats, brown bear, black bear, wolves, moose, and raptors engaged in a wide variety of activities depending on time of year, time of day and location. The short term exposure to noise and visual stimuli from helicopters enroute is minimized with an adequate distance from wildlife. The species most likely to be impacted by the Proposed Action would be mountain goats. Wildlife response will vary depending on distance to escape cover, terrain and duration of exposure. Mountain goats in kidding habitat areas (May to June 15), and on isolated habitats such as land islands surrounded by snow and ice fields, may be stressed. It is anticipated that helicopters passing 1,500 feet or more from mountain goats will cause little to no visible reaction such as a flight (running) response. Multi-agency personnel are in the process of determining adequate distances as little is currently known of the physiological or behavioral impacts on mountain goats from aircraft.

Most species of wildlife become accustomed to aircraft stimuli (including helicopters) if the perceived threat is minimized by distance, short duration of exposure, repeated patterns of flight, with avoidance of critical life cycle periods and habitats. Tolerance limits of short and long term responses of wildlife species in the proposed area are not well known.

Some bare rock outcrops in ice fields may have small numbers of goats on them. Goats access islands of habitat by crossing extensive ice fields and may occupy some year long. They would be most affected during aircraft

take-off procedures due to the sustained engine noise. Responses could range from no visible response to temporary displacement from the rock island habitat to permanent abandonment. The goats response would likely vary depending on distance of the rock island habitat from take-off and landing sites. Repeated high numbers of take-offs near the rock islands could result in temporary or permanent displacement of animals.

There is additional discussion on the noise impacts to wildlife within EA-AK-040-95-015, pages 3-11 through 13.

2. Recreation:

Noise impacts to people participating in a variety of recreational activities in the use areas may increase. These areas are also accessed by back country enthusiasts for recreation via chartered helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft or extended treks. The number of people in the area disturbed by helicopters or other aircraft is anticipated to be low, since most people access these areas by helicopter or other aircraft and are not sensitive to an occasional aircraft flying by or landing.

Recreationists could be impacted through the interruption of their solitude and quiet by the noise from helicopter overflights while involved in hiking, camping or other high alpine activities. Enroute flights would pose the least amount of noise and visual impacts. Aircraft from the communities of Skagway and Haines flying over this area are common.

More direct impacts may result from the take-off and landing activity. These activities in the landing areas have an increased duration of noise. . Some recreationists may also sense some visual disturbance to the presence of helicopters in high alpine areas.

There is additional discussion of helicopter noise in relation to recreationists and residents in EA-AK-040-95-015, pages 3-2, 3.

3. Socio-Economic Impacts:

The Proposed Action for Temsco Helicopters plays a long standing and important role in the community tax base of Skagway.

B. Impacts of the No Action Alternative:

The No Action Alternative may reduce the potential positive socio-economic impacts in the form of a lower community tax base for the municipality of

Skagway, Alaska. There is also a potential loss of recreation opportunities for people desiring access to areas they feel are otherwise inaccessible to them by conventional means.

C. Cumulative Impacts:

In 1995, EA-AK-040-95-015 analyzed the affect of glacier landings on several glaciers in the Skagway/Haines area. A large number of authorized landings have gone unused due to the applicants withdrawal. The majority of the unclaimed landing areas are west of Haines, outside the Proposed Action area. None of the previously examined and authorized landing areas south and west of Haines are being used at this time for helicopter landing tours. There is, however, a BLM permitted fixed wing flight service offering flights to areas west of Haines. Temsco Helicopters currently is authorized a total of 4,700 landings on BLM land and 3,980 on US F.S. lands.

The implementation of the Proposed Action poses no increase in the number of helicopter glacier landings in the affected environment (4,700). Thus, it is expected that there will be no overall noise impacts to wildlife from enroute aircraft. Cumulative noise impacts at landing areas are expected to be minimal if aircraft landing areas are located away from rock island habitats.

D. Mitigation Measures:

If goats are observed on rock islands, landing areas must be located a minimum of one mile from the observed goat activity. Flight paths should be altered to avoid flying over rock islands with observed goat activity.

V. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

A. Persons and Agencies Consulted:

State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources
Land Status, Letter of Concurrence

U.S. Forest Service, Juneau Ranger District,
Wildlife Consultation
Past and current NEPA documentation concerning glacier landing tours

Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Wildlife Consultation

City of Skagway
Socio-Economics
Tourism

Lynn Canal Conservation, Inc
Environmental Issues
Wildlife
Recreation issues

National Park Service
Klondike Gold Rush National Historic Park

A Public Openhouse meeting was held January 26, 2000 in Skagway to discuss commercial helicopter use in the Skagway and Haines area.

B. List of Preparers:

Jake Schlapfer, Outdoor Recreation Planner
Donna Redding, Cultural Resources
Jeff Denton, Subsistence/Wildlife
Dave Kelley, Natural Resource Specialist